THE BIRTH OF THE OFF-SCREEN OUT OF THE GHOST OF MODERNITY

“Who’s there?”

With this question, opening what is perhaps the most paradigmatic work of art in the age we have come to call modernity, something new is announced. What is this something new? The haunting of the world, the apparition of a ghost searching for a place, seeking to be heard, at the heart of the work of art. What is the nature of this ghost which Hamlet’s opening announces, what does it want from us, and what is the nature of its implication with the modern work of art? These are the questions that will guide this talk.

STAGING GHOSTS

Let us start with the above quoted question, perhaps the most fundamental question of what we can call the “modern condition”. “Who’s there?” What are the components of this question as such, even before we examine its relation to theater? First of all, we might say, the question is itself a response to something that precedes it, to a disturbance that might or might not, and this is its constitutive ambiguity, *address* (i.e., mean to call, intentionally draw the attention of) the one who responds. What is the reason for this ambiguity of the disturbance? The non-recognition of the source of address. Who, or what is it that disturbed, from where and for what reason? It is unknown, unseen. But it is precisely this unrecognizability of the disturbance, which renders those who are thus disturbed unsure whether it is meant for them or not, that can be said to constitute a *new* kind of address, if we understand being addressed in the broadest terms as that which implicates one in the question of one’s identity. Those who are thus addressed are disturbed in their very identity, for not knowing whether the
disturbance was meant for them or not, they are no longer sure who they themselves are, and we might thus say that this disturbance puts their identity, thus puts them, in question. If we read Hamlet’s opening allegorically, interpreting it, as I think it asks to be interpreted, not just as the opening of this specific play but as making a general claim about the very mode of utterance of the modern work of art, then we can say that the modern work of art is that which is dedicated to activating a disturbing address or, to use a proximate term, a call, that puts one – and by extension puts all of us, if we take our position as readers or audience to be that of the one who asks “who’s there?” - in question, since we do not know any longer by whom, and from where, and for what reason, we are addressed or called. It is thus that the one who asks the “Who’s there?” question is as if immediately exposed to the demand formulated by Hamlet’s second line: “Nay, answer me: Stand and unfold yourself.”

Being put in question by an unrecognizable address or call means, we have started to see, that we no longer know who we are, that is, no longer know what, and thus to what, we are called. We have lost our name in foreign lands, to invoke, slightly changed, Hölderlin’s famous words. This loss of name means that in a way we have been dispossessed, that is, deprived of what we take as most ours, our proper name, our identity. If it is the father who was traditionally understood as the one who assigns us to ourselves, by giving us name and identity, then this disinheritance suffered by the one who is thus called by something unrecognized, can be said to mark the failure and death of the father or of the paternal principle and his replacement by a ghostly disturbance, that is, by a disquietude with no proper place and no recognizable origin. Becoming
Hamlet, we are dispossessed of our inheritance, confronted as we are by the mysterious calling of a ghost.

Being thus disinherited by a ghostly principle, we ourselves, we can say, become ghostly, that is, nameless and indeterminate, without any recognizable identity or place of our own. The ghost that has addressed us from outside now haunts us from “inside,” so to speak, possessing us most intimately, that is, in our relation to ourselves, in our experience of who we are.

An essential ambiguity is attached to this ghostly disturbance: What does it want? Is it calling, in the name of the father, for a restoration of the paternal principle by which we have been abandoned? Is it, that is, a holy ghost, the spirit that reunites the father to the son? Or is it rather an unholy ghost, forever severing the father from the son, a voice calling for something in excess of the paternal principle, something anterior even to the calling of the father? “Remember me,” the famous words of Hamlet’s ghost. Is it the father we are called to remember, and so to restore, or is this calling to remember an even more ancient calling than the father’s? Can the crisis we have come to understand as the modern, of which *Hamlet* has often been seen as a paradigmatic expression, be at the same time an encounter with something extremely ancient, a memory we have repressed and that slowly comes to reclaim us? Can the modern work of art be understood as the “place” in which this ancient call has been resurrected? These are some of the questions we need to examine.

I would like now to take a look at the way in which this ghostly call—a call in excess of the father—is implicated in the coming to be of a new *medium* whose task it is to be the communicator of this otherworldly voice, the bringing into presence of a ghost.
I want to suggest that the modern theater as elaborated by Shakespeare, with its rigorous system of relations among text, actors, stage, and audience is such a medium, and that the development of all these theatrical elements can be seen as guided by that most elementary experience revealed to us by the opening question in *Hamlet*, the encounter with a ghostly call that puts one in question.

Let us start with the stage. (Unfortunately, I will not be able today to deal with the other elements of the theatrical medium.) What is the theatrical stage as Shakespeare, among other modern authors of course, conceives it? It is, I am suggesting, the place in which the ghost comes to *show itself* through the opening of a split or a division between something we have been calling a ghost and an identity. What does this mean? Let us look again at the opening moment of *Hamlet*, and read it now as an allegorical/formal statement about the nature of the stage as such. We have seen that the first words of *Hamlet*, thus, when read as an allegorical general statement, the first words of those who appear on stage, are “who’s there?” This means, following our discussion, that the stage is, to begin with, the place where one suffers a disorientation, where the loss of identity and name is manifest. How does the stage, *as a medium*, achieve this manifestation or showing? By becoming, I argue, a space that is cut off, or *framed out*, from the continuity of everyday life, so as to open a decontextualized zone, one abstracted from or literally *out* of this world—a zone whose most basic characteristic, is that it can belong to *any* time and *any* place. We might start to understand the uniqueness of this theatrical zone, by trying to distinguish it from a somewhat similar one, that of a temple, which also operates as a zone cut out of this world, a cutting out that is the condition for its serving as a sacred site, a site that cannot be part of the world since in a way it is that around
which the world is organized and in which the communication with that which guides the world, the gods, is supposed to happen. Once a temple has been erected (even if it could have originally been erected anywhere), it is this specific site that is now understood to be sacred or holy, an exceptional zone not fully belonging to the world, but once a modern theater has been erected, it is understood that there is nothing privileged about its site, and that, to the contrary, when we are in it we could just as well have been in a theater located anywhere else.

It is this quality of opening a space that can equally be anywhere that makes those who step onto the stage lose their specific identity in place and time and become exposed to this abstract power of the “any”. On stage, one suffer a disappropriation from a specific place and time, becoming first of all an abstract “anyone”, someone who could equally belong anywhere and anytime. “To be” on stage is “not to be” someone specific. Of course, the stage is usually populated by specific characters, a Hamlet or a Lear, etc, but what characterizes them is the specific way in which who they are, their identity, starts to suffer this exposure to the power of the anyone, the power we are calling ghostly, thus to the annihilation of their specific identity. Indeed, the specificity of theatrical characters is not the specificity of an identity, but the specific or unique way in which they live the dissolution of their identity, their “not to be-ness”, the specific way in which the ghostly disturbance unravels who they are.

We might perhaps say that this abstracting power of decontextualization has characterized the art of theater from its birth in ancient Greece, but it was Shakespeare I think, and in this lies perhaps the acknowledged novelty of his theater, who most fully liberated the stage into its abstract potential, rigorously drawing out the consequences of
the discovery of the stage as a realm out of context, so that his theater is in essence no less abstract than, say, Beckett’s. Every stage since Shakespeare is the scene of an endgame, an out-of-this-worldly zone where one rehearses or plays with the ending of the world of time and place. The Greek stage, we can say, discovered how the framing out of the world opens a decontextualized zone, which we may call the zone of *fiction or fictionality*, as distinguished from the realm of myth as well as from the praxis of sacred ritual. It discovered *a new type of cutting off* that transforms what was once also a cut off zone, that of an exceptional locus of the sacred communication with the gods—the givers of destinies, meanings, and orientation--into a realm where the gods become fictions, losing their sacred function, and thus die before our eyes. But the Greek stage, it seems to me, is not yet fully liberated from the logic of the sacred place, from the power of the temenos, the exceptional locus of communication. Rather the Greek stage might be understood as the place in which a disconnection from the gods, who themselves remain in their place, is experienced, a fundamental *mis*communication with their power to assign destinies and give orientation. These powers are perhaps not challenged in themselves, but become something to which we are irrevocably blind. Thus, while the sacred disappears as *s* communication, it persists as an inaccessible source of miscommunication and blindness. We might perhaps say that it is not the gods who are blinded, in the Greek discovery of the stage, but we who become constitutionally (rather than temporarily or with the possibility of reversal, as in the prophetic and Christian logic) blind to them, while in the modern stage, I think, it is the gods themselves who can be said to have become blind, and thus no longer gods. It is thus that it might be argued that with the Shakespearean stage the full consequence of the death of god (on stage)
finally becomes manifest and with it the loss of any transcendent ground of meaning. The Shakespearean stage is thus neither a site of sacred communication, nor the site of its constitutive failure, but the non-place or any-place where the disappearance of the sacred is communicated, and it is the modern ghost, which this stage allows to appear, that is the agent of this communication.

But we may be moving too fast. Let us return to the analysis of the Shakespearean stage as medium. As a decontextualized zone where one loses one’s specific identity and is exposed to the power of the “any,” the stage, Shakespeare saw, is also revealed to be inseparable from an invisible and enigmatic realm that surrounds it, an off-stage—a realm beyond the stage, to which that which is on stage seems to relate or with which it communicates. What and where is this off-stage? It is nowhere specific, and thus, like Hamlet’s ghost to which that which happens on stage continually refers, has no actual presence. The off-stage is not the physical and historical world “surrounding” the stage, since, we have seen, the stage opens as a completely decontextualized zone divorced from actual time and space. It is thus that if the on-stage refers to something off-stage - most paradigmatically the ghost, but Hamlet is full of speeches about things happening off-stage, people hiding in an unseen spaces, behind curtains, etc - what it refers to cannot be part of the actual physical/historical world but belongs to a realm proper to the theater. The off-stage cannot be beside or above or in any precisely defined spatial/temporal relation to the stage itself. We can again distinguish I think between the Shakespearean off-stage and the Greek obscene (the ob skene), that which should not be shown in the amphitheater, usually of violent nature. For while the obscene, as in the case of Oedipus taking out his eyes, belongs in principle to a realm continuous with the time-
space of the dramatic events, the off-stage, and hence the significance of having the ghost serve as the paradigmatic figure associated with it, seems to mark an interruption in the continuity of the world and an exposure to something which does not take place in any actual time or place, a dimension where the time is out of joint. We might therefore perhaps define the off-stage as nothing but the power of decontextualization itself, that which as if holds the power *not to be* anywhere specific, not to belong any actual time or place.

If this is indeed the case, then to come *on* stage means to start communicating with the mysterious off-stage and become exposed to, and haunted by, its decontextualizing power, a power of absolute discontinuity with the actual world. Coming onstage one loses one’s specific identity, struck by a phantom or ghost, the empty power of the “any,” the restlessness of that which has no time or place of its own. The one coming onstage thus becomes, to cite some authoritative Shakespearean figurations, a madman on a heath, a sovereign who has lost his kingdom, a lover entering a magical forest where people are not themselves, a castaway marooned on an enchanted island controlled by a magician, etc. But most paradigmatically, to come onstage is to lose one’s given name, to be subject to the calling of a ghost, and indeed, in a way, to become a ghost, to be abstracted from one’s actual place and time. The modern theater, we might therefore say, can be described as a medium devised for showing the dimension of the off-stage, or showing ghosts, making them present on stage. It is because of this that Hamlet indeed opens with the question of the night *watchers*, the first witnesses of the ghost, watchers who, we can say, serve as the very figure for the modern audience, an
audience made to see a new kind of ghost, one that possibly has never come into view before.

By aligning its thematic content, the story of an encounter with a ghostly call following the death of a father, with the form of the medium of theater as constructed upon the reciprocal on stage/off stage relationship through which a dimension that is hauntingly out of specific time and place appears and starts to speak, Hamlet aims to be read, I suggest, as a general theory about the logic of modern theater. I would further like to suggest, that not only is it a general statement about the logic of the modern theater, but about the logic of the modern work of art in general, and that as such it can serve as a general matrix for thinking about the various artistic media of modernity. I would now like to argue for the generality of this logic by showing how it operates in two other media, that of painting and that of film. I will take a look at two works, both dealing with the question of the loss of the father by a son, and in both, I will argue, a reflection about the father/son question becomes a way through which to think about the natures of their respective artistic media.

THE MODERN IMAGE: FALLING INTO THE LANDSCAPE

It is to Pieter Bruegel the Elder that I want to turn first, in order briefly to show how the medium of painting, as developed by the great Renaissance painters, comes to be and to understand itself as a medium structured around the relation between an on-space and an off-space, a relation through which the on-space becomes the plane where a disorienting ghost, that is, a restlessness with no specific time or place of its own, come to be inscribed and show itself. Though a somewhat vague connection between Bruegel and Shakespeare has occasionally been noted, what has not been noted, as far as I know, is
that the Shakespearean stage and the Bruegelian pictorial plane operate according to a similar logic and that both artists share a similar ambition when it comes to exploiting their respective artistic media.

It is to one of Bruegel’s most famous paintings, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, that I would like at first to turn. (SHOW PAINTING NOW)

Though having an ostensible theme, drawn from a passage in Ovid describing the escape of Daedalus and his son Icarus from the labyrinth and the subsequent fall of Icarus whose urge for transcendence has brought him too close to the sun, two things stand out when we really look at this painting: first, it is not at all clear what it is *about*, what kind of meaning it is trying to convey or make visible. This lack of meaning and aboutness arises because there seems to be nothing in the painting that can firmly *orient* us, nothing that tells us where to direct our gaze, what is at the center and what is at the margins, what is hierarchically more significant and what is less so. We are thus left with a vague feeling of indeterminacy. We start to meander, as if lost, looking for a point of anchorage. To be sure, the prominent figure of a farmer ploughing the land might catch our eye before we notice the splashing feet, which are almost hidden in the right hand corner of the painting, yet there is no way of deciding even between these two (or between them and the numerous other figures that draw our attention) which is more central, especially since the farmer, as well as obviously the drowning boy, is, like so many of Bruegel’s figures, effaced or faceless. Similarly, another quite noticeable figure, a shepherd, while not faceless, seems to direct his gaze to some indeterminate spot above and possibly outside the frame (is it the flying Daedalus? is it a bird? or is the shepherd simply transfixed in thought?) making it impossible for us to identify what is at stake in
his gaze. Not knowing what the painting is about, nor how to orient our gaze, we abandon ourselves, lose a grasp of who and where and when we are, lose the ground (that is, the place and orientation) of our existence we can say, and start to fall, possibly like the rebel angels, abandoned by the Father, in another of Bruegel’s famous paintings about falling.

(SHOW IMAGE)

We can already see how the most famous response to the painting, Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” while undoubtedly moving and beautiful, is also reassuringly sentimental, restoring an orientation which the painting does not so easily give. For to suggest - as Auden does in the famous line “how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster” - that the painting is about an unnoticed suffering, happening at the margins, is nevertheless to restore order. It is the unnoticeable suffering that is now at the center while the center becomes marginalized. The work of disorientation is thus quickly resolved by interpreting the painting as a simple mechanism, where we first notice something we assume is central, but then reverse the hierarchy, moving the margin to the center. As a result we reorient and redefine ourselves as people who can learn through art to respond properly to suffering, to understand “its human position,” in Auden’s words. While this is not a bad lesson, to be sure, we must not stop there if we are to understand the work of the image in Bruegel.

Let us then continue to fall with the painting, or at least to follow the type of watching that it activates, watching here to be understood as the specific way of relating to an image which the modern work of art attempts to activate, as it deprives us of meaning, identity, and orientation. We can already start to see that the surface of the picture, not unlike the Shakespearean stage, becomes the place where we are deprived of
our identity, our knowledge of who we are, and upon which we encounter various unidentified, effaced figures, who refuse us a place. Like prince Hamlet become a watcher of ghosts, the watchers of the painting find themselves suspended, that is, not knowing how to orient themselves, thus becoming incapable of action. As in Hamlet, this moment of suspension and loss can also be experienced as an address, as an empty call. For it is only when we no longer know what the painting means or intends, and thus no longer know who we are, that the painting can be said to start implicating us, putting us in question.

Thinking further about its ostensible theme, the flight of Daedalus and Icarus, we may speculate that the source of this estranging disorientation is the fact that the two main figures we should expect to find there, are, strangely, missing. Of Icarus, whose legs alone are showing, we can say basically nothing, while more troubling yet, Daedalus does not seem to be present at all. Thinking of Hamlet, we wonder whether it is this absence of Daedalus, the father—the one who was supposed to orient and govern the flight from the labyrinth—that is responsible for our own disorientation, our own helpless fall. If so, the absence of the father Daedalus from the frame of the picture has the effect of making the viewer into Icarus. We ourselves become the subject of the painting’s title, falling icaruses, abandoned by the father. We might thus start to see that the absent Daedalus here indeed operates like a ghost, a disinheriting absence depriving the viewer of an identifiable character. As was the case in Hamlet, this ghostly absence, we can say, can be read as an allegory of the nature of the artistic medium, now that of painting. For the absence of Daedalus is an absence, precisely, from the pictorial plane, and his ghostly “presence”, his disorienting “power”, comes from the fact that this absence expresses a
split upon which the painterly medium is constituted, between a pictorial plane, what is seen on the canvas, and something we might call an off-plane or off-frame. We might therefore understand the picture’s frame, the edges that mark the cutting point of what we are given to see on the canvas, as the marking of an opening into a mysterious realm, nowhere present, and which is nothing, as it was in the case of the theatrical stage, but the power to decontextualize the canvas, constituting it as a ghostly realm populated by effaced and unidentified figures.

Joseph Koerner, in an essay on Bruegel, makes an important point that is very helpful in the context of our current discussion. Drawing a distinction between Bruegel and his influential predecessor Hieronymus Bosch, Koerner says: “Bosch not only marks the midpoint with some special element in the picture’s composition; he also connects that element, by way of its centered mark, to a divine architecture transcending the painting’s fiction. Flanked by paradise or hell, beginning and end, archē and telos, the center receives in Bosch an absolute foundation. And because some of his paintings served as altarpieces, these painted centers are anchored, metaphysically, to altar, church, and cosmos, and thus to the divinity whose salvific plan they diagrammed. Bruegel produced no altarpieces. His vehicles were the engraving and the gallery picture. Built for mobility, and stabilized only by the structural coherence of their views, these rectangular, window-sized objects envelop us in their ample frame, wherever they hang” (p. 41, emphasis mine).

Thus the Boschian painting, still attached to an economy of the sacred, marks a privileged place of revelation, connecting a center of orientation on the pictorial plane to an originary and invisible source of cosmic orientation. The visible painting is thus the
locus of revelation of a divine, invisible, origin. The Bruegelian painting, on the other hand, is designed to be, in Koerner’s words, “wherever,” or what I have called anytime/anyplace, and it therefore activates a new thinking of the artistic frame; for it is the artistic frame that opens this dimension of “wherever.” The frame, that which cuts the pictorial plane, marking its limits, is now to be understood as that which holds the power of decontextualization, activating an absolute non-belongingness to any order or place, a pure capacity not to be here or there, which amounts to being as well a pure capacity to disorient—to neutralize any sense of order or hierarchy—such that new orientations, not given in advance, can come about. In this sense we can see that the modern artistic frame operates as an undermining of what we usually take a frame to be, namely, that which establishes a division between what is contained in the frame and what is relegated to its outside, what belongs to an order that the frame establishes, and what does not belong. The artistic frame, we might therefore say, is actually something which unframes, in the sense that the operation of its borders is not to create a sense of belonging but rather, through cutting its content out of any given context, to create a sense of non-belonging, not being part of any given order. We might therefore say that it is not that the Bruegelian paintings envelop us in their ample frames, as Koerner says, but rather that they suspend us and expose us to the dimension of the off-frame, a dimension that the frame, as a cut, activates. The off-frame, the haunting that accompanies the pictorial plane as a virtual power of decontextualization, is thus no longer occupied by a divine invisibility guiding a cosmic order, as was the case in Bosch, but activates a haunting nothingness, marking the absence of divine orientation. We might thus understand the cut, the cutting out of a
context, that the artistic frame introduces as a pure or absolute cut, that is, not as a cut into any specific thing, but the cutting of the world itself out of order.

We can say, then, that Bruegel, as architect of a decontextualizing frame that brings about a pure cut, is not a painter of cosmic order, but of something we may call a worldly groundlessness, that is, of the world as a realm not guided by divine orientation, but haunted by a disorienting call.

What is the pictorial term most deeply implicated in this showing of a groundless world? The title of Bruegel’s painting, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, whether or not it was Bruegel himself who named it, gives us a clue. The modern painting, we may say, is a landscape. Bruegel is usually considered one of the greatest of European landscape painters, but what is a landscape, and why does it take shape in this newly devised pictorial realm, haunted by an absence? These questions are obviously too complex to deal with in any depth in the current context, but we can at least start to see that the landscape for Bruegel is the realm that opens out of a new type of watching—a watching I have described as suspended or ghostly, to be distinguished from oriented perception. The pictorial landscape, which is always something that seems to give the feeling of a certain abandoned emptiness, is the space that opens for the viewer who, deprived of paternal orientation and exposed to the call of the any/time-place, asks the question “who’s there?” It is the space in which the disoriented, dreamy movement of our eyes, abandoned by the ordering of a world established by paternal orientation, start to aimlessly roam without any privileged point to orient and command them—becoming flaneurs on the canvas—and experience a freedom of the world not to be this or that specific world. One can now begin to understand how the disappearance of Daedalus as
paternal orientation, the falling of Icarus as the result of this loss, and the opening up of a landscape understood as the world cut off from any established order are intimately tied together. If we read the painting allegorically, as we did Hamlet, seeing in what it shows the expression of a general claim about the nature of the modern medium of painting, then perhaps we can say that every modern painting is in a way a landscape with a falling Icarus, the activation of an arena in which our eyes, released by the pictorial frame from the actuality of perception, open to a new type of watching that implies our simultaneous suspension, that is our being caught in the loss of any given order, and fall, that is, our being exposed to the disappearance of the ground or established ordering of the world.

**OFF-SCREEN – THE CINEMATIC IMAGE AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF RETURN**

“Altogether the ghost ought to be the most real, concrete character in the play” (Andrei Tarkovsky on staging Hamlet)

I would now like to take a closer look at the general logic of one more medium, the medium of film, which, I argue, both continues as well as transforms the logic we have been tracing in theater and painting. The example I’ve chosen is Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, yet another tale of fathers, sons and ghosts.

The story line of *Solaris* is fairly minimal. Psychologist Kriss Kelvin is spending a day visiting his father, with whom he has a complex and tense relationship, at his childhood home, walking along the local rivers and lakes. He is about to depart on a long voyage to a space station orbiting the mysterious oceanic planet Solaris. For a while now, reports from the space station have been incomprehensible and Kriss is supposed to
assess the situation of its inhabitants. Arriving, he realizes that the two remaining crew members--a third having killed himself--are plagued by strange visitations or visions, transmitted from the ocean of Solaris. The nature of these visitations is not exactly clear, but they seem to have something to do with traumatic memories that the inhabitants of the space station communicate to the ocean, which in turn communicates to them the all too real visions by which they are haunted. Very soon after arriving, Kriss himself receives a visitation from his late wife, who has killed herself some years before. At first horrified, Kriss tries to eliminate the visitor, who proves indestructible and keeps returning after every such attempt. Slowly, he comes to accept the ghost, at which point she herself, for reasons not fully clear, departs, and this disappearance seems to be accompanied by the creation of mysterious green islands on the surface of the ocean. Left alone, Kriss is uncertain whether to go back home or to descend to the surface of Solaris. Following this hesitation, we see him back in his childhood home, having returned to his father. Yet something is strange. The living room of the house is flooded, and as the father goes out to greet him and Kriss gets on his knees in a pose taken from Rembrandt’s painting of the prodigal son, the camera zooms out, and to our astonishment we realize that Kriss is not back in his father’s house but on one of Solaris’s green islands, a virtual double of the paternal home. It is with this strange return/non-return to the paternal home that the movie ends.

**THE BAPTISMAL IMAGE**

Let us start with the opening of the film, always the best place to look for the rules of the game the director is establishing for us. (SHOW CLIP) A tightly framed view of a body of water beneath which green plants are quietly twisting in the current. We are
positioned just above the surface of the water. Our view is extremely limited; we do not
know what kind of body of water it is (a stream, a river, a sea, an ocean, etc.) nor where
exactly it is located, nor at what time of day this is taking place. The frame is still and
fixed, and for a brief moment we are as if in a trance, transfixed by the absence of any
point of purchase. But this lasts only for a few brief seconds. Suddenly, a leaf flows from
off-screen into the frame, only to leave it very soon after. As the leaf enters the frame
from the upper right, the camera starts to move to the left, not exactly following the leaf,
but in the general direction of its movement. Awakened from our trance, we suddenly
feel addressed or called by this movement of the camera. To be addressed here means
that our identity has been suspended and is in question, that we become personally
implicated in what is happening on screen, because we do not know what the meaning of
the situation we are confronting is and thus who we are in relation to it: “Who’s there?”

Why does the camera move? Does it move for a reason, or arbitrarily? What is the
context that controls its movement, if there is one, and how shall we orient ourselves
toward it? We do not know, and, as a consequence, do not know what our own place is,
what our calling is in relation to the scene that has opened up before us. We are called to
or faced with a question of meaning, but we do not know what it is, and it is the camera’s
movement, not motivated by any locatable principle and so experienced as ghostly, as a
restlessness without a place of its own, that first puts us in question, activating this empty
call. This watery scene, which introduces a disorientation which seems to deprive us of
our calling or name, can thus be understood as a baptism, introducing us into a new
(empty) calling as members of the community of cinema watchers, witnesses to a new
type of image. Our actual name, we can say, has been suspended, and replaced by a poetic calling, the calling of the cinematic image.

Let us examine the components and logic of this cinematic image and the nature of the poetic calling it activates.

We have seen that the camera starts to move as the leaf enters the cinematic frame from the off-screen. This means, reading allegorically, that the camera gains its power to move from the fact that the off-screen intrudes into the screen even as the screen bleeds into the off-screen (for the leaf immediately floats out of frame). The off-screen and the screen thus start communicating with each other, “allowing” the camera to move. We have seen how both the question of the modern stage and the question of modern painting open up and acquire urgency through the positing of a relation between a decontextualized zone (the stage, the canvas) and a dimension of “offness” (the off-stage, the off-frame). In both these modalities of “offness” a radical separation has been introduced between whatever actuality might surround the artistic zone—say, the backstage of the theater, as well as the streets beyond the theater—and artistic zone itself, occupying as it does an anytime/anyplace. No communication is allowed between the stage or the canvas, and the actuality surrounding it, for should that happen the power of the fictional world would evaporate, and the illusion, as they used to say, would be ruined. It is this prohibition on communication between the fictional and the actual that Diderot has articulated in his famous discussion of the invisible “fourth wall.”

With cinema something new happens, something that does not perhaps even happen with photography: the actual world and the ghostly anytime/anyplace start communicating according to an enigmatic new logic. Let us take the example of the leaf
we have been following. As the leaf floats onto the screen it seems to have a double quality. On the one hand, the leaf on screen is obviously continuous with the leaf off-screen. The water and the leaf floating on it are only a slice of a larger view to which we have no access, which extends both before and after the moment we have been shown. This assumption of continuity is justified by our knowledge that the camera is simply a recording device, completely passive in relation to what it shows. The body of water is something which the camera, due to its passivity, cannot help but register if its directed to it, and in this sense it must be part of a continuous world that extends beyond the screen.

On the other hand, the leaf flowing onto the screen strikes us with a powerful discontinuity. For the screen as a disconnected surface also marks an absolute cut between what it shows and its surroundings, creating an effect of invisibility. It thus shares with the canvas and the stage the ability to create a decontextualized zone, which activates a haunting by an anytime/anyplace. The leaf, though part of the continuous world that the camera passively recorded, seems to emerge at the same time from an “otherworldly” anywhere/anytime, becoming the ghostly medium of an unlocatable “beyond.” It is because of this that the floating leaf is able to serve as the messenger or herald of Solaris’s mysterious world-to-come. The leaf is double; it is at once an actual leaf and a medium of an unlocatable beyond. The off-screen, as the matrix of this doubling, is perhaps the fundamental innovation of the art of film; for it indicates both the continuous world beyond what the screen shows and an anytime/anyplace “beyond” that continuous world. It is because the screen is simultaneously both continuous and discontinuous with the actual world that it exceeds the power of the stage and the canvas; for in theater and painting the poetic realm had to be artificially created, fictionality could
only be achieved by divorcing reality, while in cinema it is *reality as a whole*, by virtue of doubling or self-division, which appears with the ghostly aura of the fictional. We can perhaps understand this cinematic doubling achieved by means of the logic of the off-screen with the help of another modern concept trying to capture an artistic revolution, that of the readymade. Andre Breton famously gave the definition of the readymade by calling it "an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.", a definition which we can perhaps rephrase by saying that in cinema reality as a whole, simply by being mediated through the passivity of the recording camera and the decontextualization of the screen is doubled, becoming ghostly, and achieves the status of fiction.

Let us try to go a bit farther with our reading of *Solaris*. After the leaf exits the screen, the river or stream of water continues to flow for a few seconds, then a cut, the first of the movie, opens onto another view of flowing water and the greenery beneath it, still very close to the surface, without affording anything like a general context. We have already seen in our examination of Bruegel that what we may call the pure cut is implicit in the logic of the off-space, a cut which introduces an emptiness, an anytime(anyplace), into the dimension of actuality. The cinematic pure cut is a cut which is never motivated or explained, that is, can never be understood according to an already existing order of intelligibility, and is thus not a cut into any specific thing but a way of activating a disorienting emptiness, which in Bruegel we described as “worldly groundlessness” (the loss of divine orientation). This means that the relation between any two shots separated by a cut, a major discovery of Griffithian montage, is no longer grounded by any necessary order of established connections we are familiar with. It is this capacity for
disorientation involved in the cut that Tarkovsky uses here in a very interesting manner, and although it is not fully apparent until we have seen the entire film, what happens immediately following this first cut is extremely strange, for it is not in fact clear whether what we are seeing is (as we assume) the same stream, still from up close though from another perspective, or some totally different body of water, possibly an ocean dotted with green islands, but now seen from a remote distance. Where exactly are we? Are we very close or are we very far, on earth or floating indeterminately in outer space? It is only toward the very end of the film, when we return to this image, seen now as the ocean of Solaris perceived through the window of a space ship, that we can begin to articulate its ambiguity. Only with the doubling of the image do we realize we have been seeing double. Yet the ambiguity was already vaguely present in the strangeness of this image. We might in fact say that the voyage from earth to a mysterious fictional world is nothing but a specific literalization of the disorienting feeling that the image had already evoked in us as a result of the first cut.

Let us continue with this scene for a bit, trying to bring in the question of the father/son relations that structures much of our discussion, and which to a large extent motivates the entirety of Solaris, but most explicitly in scenes we unfortunately won’t get a chance to follow. Following this first cut we have just examined, the camera starts to move slowly to the right, still very close to the surface of the water. Gradually it reveals a human leg that enters from the off-screen, then moving up slowly, it shows us first a fragment of a body and then finally a face, abstractly looking or watching with an opaque expression, for it is not clear what it is watching nor what its intention might be. Le voilà, the protagonist of our film, Kriss.
As was the case with our leaf, but now in a more complex manner, the protagonist who here arrives on screen performs multiple functions. The fact that his intrusion is fragmentary—that his body is constantly split, the part on screen divided from the part that is off—announces that the figure entering the film is to be understood in relation to the divide on-screen/off-screen, and that the meaning of his adventure will have to be understood through this divide. The fragmented body, partly invisible, thus making the off-screen present, increases at first the off-screen’s disturbing power to decontextualize and dislocate, but then the arrival of the face, as the main marker in any human identification, seems to relieve us momentarily of the anxiety introduced by the fragmentation. If the off-screen arrests and disorients us like an empty, messageless call, the face, we can say, when it functions as a marker of identity, returns us to a home, a place we can call our own. Speaking figuratively, the arrival of our protagonist’s face on screen serves a paternal function. (to clarify, even though Kriss occupies the place of the son in the movie I am reading here the effect of his introduction in relation to the viewer, where he also serves a paternal function). But the father we have just been offered immediately turns out to be a ghost, that is, a father who fails to perform his function of giving us a name and a determinate place of our own, and is taken over by a power of restless indeterminacy. How so? By having him gaze opaquely into the off-screen, as if watching for something there, not unlike Bruegel’s shepherd gazing abstractly beyond the frame of the canvas. This means that his gaze is immediately infused with the haunting, dislocating power of the off-screen and that he becomes himself afflicted by its disorienting, identity-effacing power. Gazing beyond the frame, the supposed father gives up his paternal identity, becoming a suffering witness to the power of the off-screen. But
even more disturbingly, no sooner have we seen this haunted look than the protagonist suffers a cut, the second cut of the movie, signifying his complete exposure to the off-screen and as a consequence the complete loss of our capacity to have a place of our own.

What follows this cut is a close-up view of the water (SHOW REST OF CLIP HERE?). Approaching gradually, the camera, in a vertiginous movement, gets nearer and nearer to the water which seem to thus become the element where the supposed father (whom we might now see rather as an Icarus) drowns, having lost his ground. We can thus say that the “paternal” face has been transformed, according to the logic that guides the entire film, into a haunting, disinheriting *image*, the image, to repeat, being understood as the inscription of the dimension of the off in the actual through the medium of a decontextualizing frame. It is the water, then, as it does in so many works of art, that comes to stand in the film for the very being of what we have been calling image, and the power of the image, understood as the ghostly power to unground the father, is thus figured as the bringing about of a drowning. In this drowning of the father it is also we who have been rendered groundless, exposed to the ghostly anywhere/anytime.

Let us consider one of the most fundamental of cinematic devices, the close-up, in relation to this cutting of the “father” and his transformation into a ghostly image. What is a close-up? We can say that the close-up operates, on the one hand, by enabling us to perceive *more* of a specific object, but, on the other hand, by cutting out more and more of the context of the world and thus giving us *less* to see, it inflictits us with a certain loss. Yet in cutting the world out, the close up activates not only a loss, a loss of the world, but also a certain gain, the increased presence of the off-screen accompanied by an increased exposure to its powers of decontextualization. Thus, in the scene under
discussion, as our gaze gets ever closer to the water, the meaningful world seems to become ever more distant. The more we approach the object focused in the close-up, the further we drift from the world and from ourselves. It is this feeling of getting simultaneously nearer and farther that produces the sense of vertigo or drowning. To repeat, the cutting out effected by the close-up is not just the increasing loss of the world and absence of meaningful context but also the increasing presence of the dimension of the off-screen. This presence of the off is something that becomes inscribed, as it were, in the object still before us, (for example a stream of water), which as a result gains itself a haunting power, as if it has been illuminated and possessed by an invisible aura, a power often understood in cinema as erotic.

Another aspect of the gradual close-up is fundamental in this context. By giving us an “object” that is progressively disconnected from any definite time and place, the close up seems to activate an anachronic relation to time, starting to communicate simultaneously with the past and with the future. Most radically, as in our film, this anachronic communication takes the form of a prophetic announcement of a future event and of an involuntary resurgence of an earlier scene (a scene for which we can use the Freudian term primal), that until the close up as if remained inaccessible to conscious memory, since it did not occupy an actual determined time or place but was the very happening of an ungrounding by an anytime/anyplace. Something we might understand as an unremembered past (that is, a past not available to linear consciousness, since it is not locatable in any contextually specific place or time) which we experience as a traumatic haunting seems to communicate with an unknown future in the vertiginous image activated by the close up. Thus, in the scene we are looking at, the close up of the
water brings about in the form of a resurgent memory, a resurrection even we might say, of the very first image of the film, which we examined earlier, the flowing water with the leaf that enters the screen out of time and out of place, as well as the announcement of the future ocean of Solaris. It is not the body of water itself that is repeated, but the image of the water, or of the water having become image through the decontextualizing effect of the opening shot; this image as if left the viewer with an originary scar, a memory trace in the sense of the relentless insistence of an unlocatable haunting, which can then be resurrected as an involuntary memory each time the contextual ground dissolves and we are exposed anew to the groundless. Every powerful experience of an exposure to the dimension of the off-frame--that is, every interruption of the paternal calling, and thus of the stability of the meaningful world --will thus reactivate the originary, primal, image of the opening of the film. Even more complexly, endowing the water, through the device of the close up, with the power of the “off”, that is, the power to activate an absolute decontextualization, already announces the transformation of the water from being an image into being an apparatus of image making, that is, into a medium imbued with the capacity to make ghostly haunttings appear, or reappear, through the establishment of a decontextualized zone. In brief, the close up we are examining is thus that which can already be said in a way to announce the transformation of the stream of water into the ocean of Solaris, that is, into a medium of decontextualization, capable of resurrecting unassimilable or traumatic events of the past such as Kriss’ dead wife, as well as of opening an undetermined future. The ocean of Solaris is thus nothing but cinema itself, a medium announced from the very beginning of the movie through the device of the close up which endowed the water with the power to fictionalize.
FROM THE GHOST OF THE FATHER TO THE IMAGE OF THE ORIGIN

It is due to this proleptic nature of the very first image in the film, the image of the origin, the primal image, that we can leap now to the very end of the film and to its enigmatic treatment of the question of return.

Solaris is a story of voyage and return. The film’s first images, we have been seeing, implied the cutting of the father and his transformation into a haunting ghost or image. This haunting is at the origin of an otherworldly voyage which demands the abandonment of a paternal home, the loss of an inheritance. By the same token, the film’s final images, based on Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal Son (show image), might seem to stand under the sign of a return to the father. If this were indeed the case, then the protagonist’s adventure would end successfully according to a pre-Hamletic logic, whether that logic appears in its Greek form as an Odyssean journey back from exile, or in its Christian form as conversion and redemption.

I want to argue, however, that if Solaris indeed tries to articulate a solution to what we can call Hamletic blockage—a blockage tied to the unforeseeable call of the ghost who, by remaining inaccessible, both prompts and frustrates a desire to restore the father—it is not by resorting to a pre-Hamletic restorative logic (as Tarkovsky, a supposedly religious filmmaker, is often understood to be doing), but rather by a new embrace of the principle of the “off” (embodied in the Shakespearean ghost) and a new adherence to its demands. This new embrace of the “off” implies, I want to argue, a transformation in our very understanding of the artistic image, a transformation explored by all modern artistic media, as I have tried to show, but perhaps most radically by film. The artistic or poetic image, within this new understanding, is no longer conceptualized,
as it was in the Christian iconological tradition, as an earthly mediator capable of
incarnating an invisible paternal call to order or command; rather, the artistic image is
now understood as the capacity to activate and bring into expression an originary,
unconscious image—a primal inscription of a groundlessness or lack of orientation,
figured in our example by the ghostly river. In the beginning was not a word (in the sense
of a paternal call to order), but an image (in the sense of an inscription of worldly
groundlessness).

We might distinguish then between a sacred understanding of the image, and a
modern, artistic understanding. An image, we can say, is by definition something which
refers to an origin, being always an “image of…”, an origin in relation to which it raises
the possibility or the impossibility of a return. The sacred image, in this case, could be
viewed as that which activates a return to an origin understood as a paternal ground, an
invisible command marking an order, while the artistic image is now to be understood as
the coming into view, the apparition, of an originary, unconscious (in the sense that it is
not an actuality taking a specific place and time) inscription of worldly groundlessness,
an apparition enabled through the emergence of a new kind of medium of
decontextualization through which an unconscious ghost can come to show itself.

It is this redefinition of the image that, we might say, is the message of “Kriss” (A
modern “Christ”), the protagonist of Solaris: The image is not a call to return to a
paternal ground from which we have been alienated but a call to remember an originary
encounter with a non-ground, with a primal exposure to a principle of effacement and
disorientation, the principle we have called that of the “off”, before or in excess of
paternal calling.). The revelation of that dimension of originary haunting, bringing it into
apparition, and thus remembering what could not be remembered otherwise, is the special achievement of the artistic medium. In this sense the end of Solaris emphasizing, through the use of Rembrandt, the emergence of an artistic image, is to be understood as the successful creation of the a poetic image rather than a return to a paternal origin achieved through the medium of a sacred image. To remember the ghost ("remember me") would thus not be the call to avenge the death of the father and restore the paternal word, as Hamlet mistakenly thought, and hence his tragedy, which could be understood as the tragedy of the failure to become artist of the one who nevertheless is exposed to the call of the groundless origin, but to resurrect and to remember something that could not be remembered, since it had no place or time of its own, a memory that can only be achieved through the coming to be of an artistic image. To go beyond Hamlet and perhaps beyond the falling Icarus, is thus to be able to transform the ghost of the father into a poetic image.